

Life in a Cookbook

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FLK 399

Professor Kaufkins

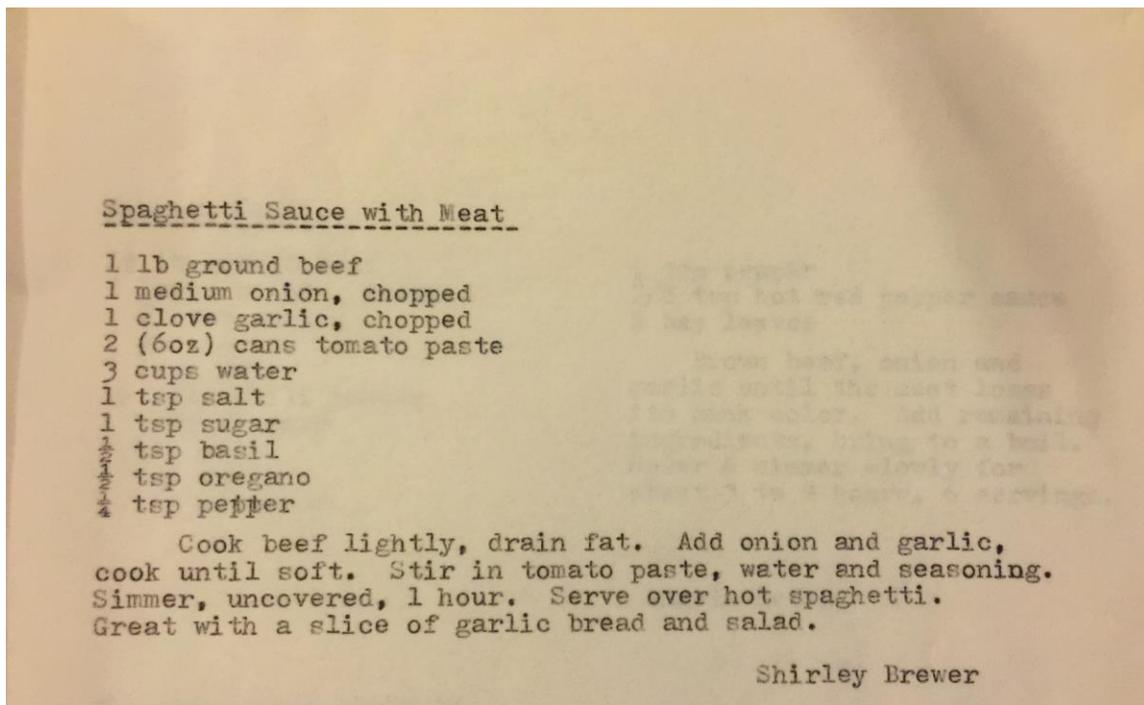
Abstract

Food is an inevitable part of everyday life, without it survival would not be possible. When we partake in something so often it is easily intertwined within our memories. In this paper I explain how recipes can be used as a way to store these memories for its owner. I also point out how the recipes that one has collected in something, such as a cookbook can tell the story of the owner's life. For my cookbook examples I used my grandmother's cookbook entitled, "Wednesdays Sewing Club." To collect my information for this paper (other than using the cookbook), I interviewed Shirley Brewer (my grandmother), researched scholarly articles, and relied on my own experiences to formulate the ideas in this assignment.

Food consumes all of your senses; from the sound of bacon sizzling, the smell of a cake in the oven, seeing a Thanksgiving feast spread out over the table, to picking up that juicy cheeseburger and taking a bite. It is not hard to figure out why we have such a connection to the things we eat, and why they are so powerful when it comes to memories. Cookbooks are like a Rolodex of these stored memories just waiting to be accessed; memories that are to be handed down to the next generation. As Jessica Harris puts it " ' When you take the time to teach younger members of a family how to cook a treasured recipe [...] you are not only a caretaker of past traditions, but you are also an investor in the harmony and the hope for the future' " (Eves 2005, 290). Therefore, when a cookbook has been handed down the new owner is "partaking in centuries of history, traditions, and culture" (Eves 2005, 285).

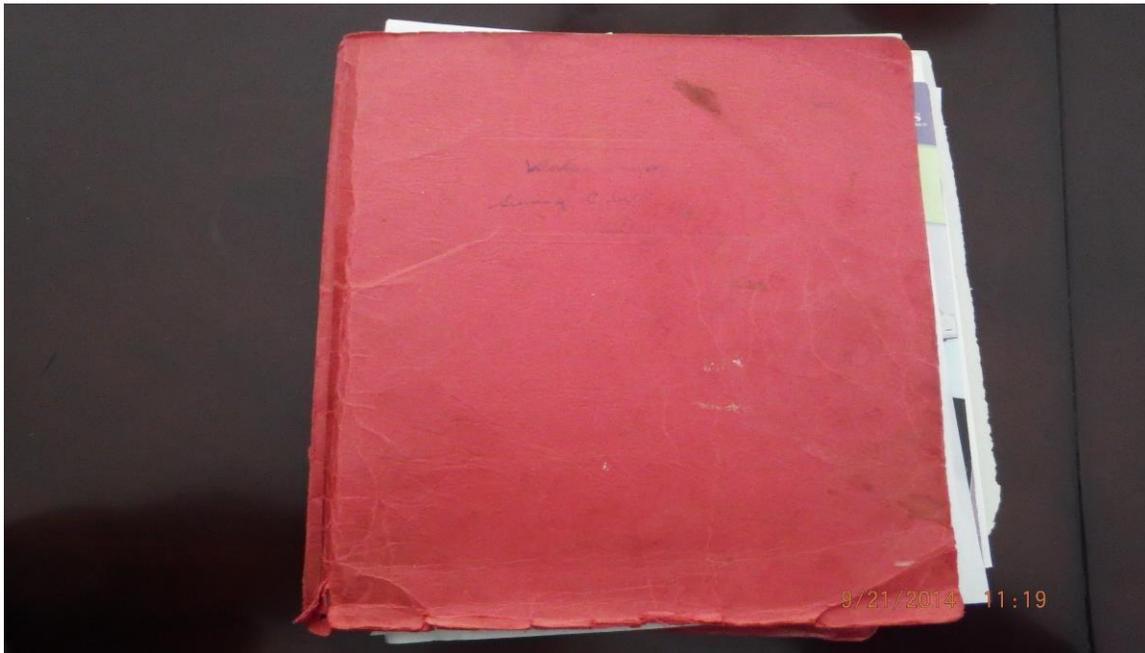
Unbeknownst to her, much like the generations before, my grandmother has also handed down recipes and taught the inexperienced youth the ways of the kitchen.

During an interview I asked her what one of her favorite recipes would be from a cookbook that she owned, “I really like the meat sauce recipe. It has always been my favorite, I make it quite a bit, but I’m not sure how everyone else feels about it, no one has ever gotten the recipe from me.”(Brewer, 2014) She was surprised when I informed her that both my mother and I make our spaghetti sauce the exact same way it is stated on the “Spaghetti Sauce With Meat” recipe. Years of helping her cook in the kitchen have led to us memorizing many of my grandmother’s recipes without ever seeing her cookbooks. The recipes in a cookbook serve a purpose other than remembering the ingredients. These recipes are meant to be shared and taught to others. “As stand-alone lists of ingredients, recipes do not usually suggest much. But collected and arranged within a particular context, they begin to signify a great deal. These written records also become a witness to something received and passed down through generations” (Eves, 288).

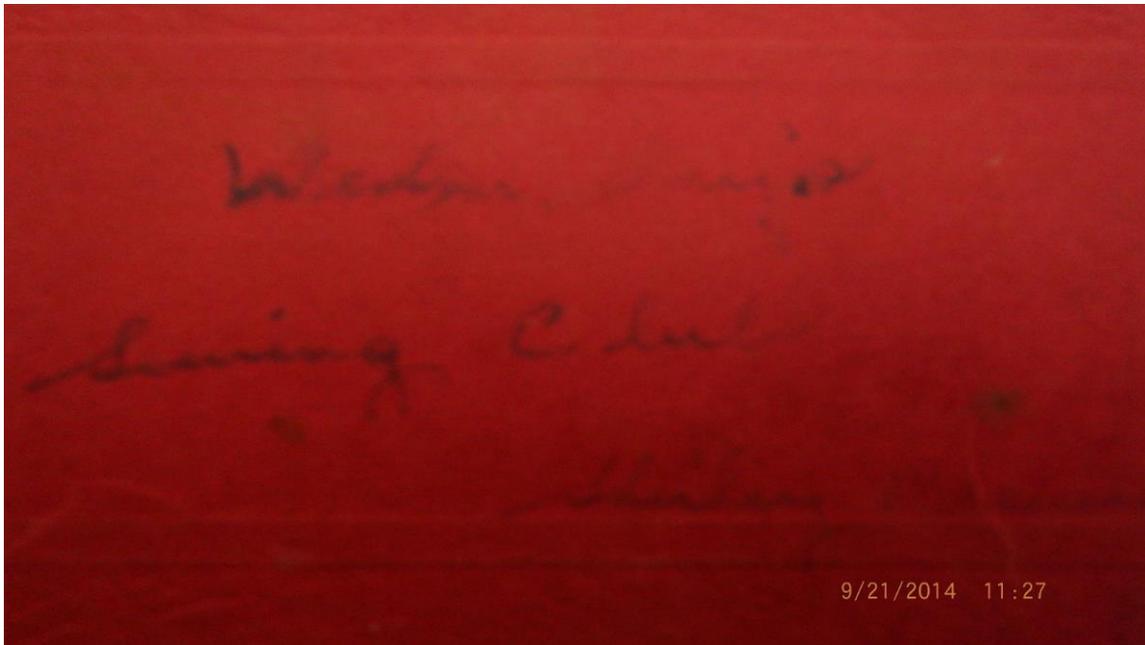


Spaghetti Sauce with Meat recipe

If one wanted to take a trip through history and learn about my grandmother's life you would only have to step inside the front door into the dining room. Stashed away in a brown wooden china hutch you will find many memories hidden inside it. The top of the hutch contains small bell souvenirs from every place she has ever been. In the middle drawers, there are pens, pencils, and addresses/phone numbers of all the important people in her life. The bottom left hand cabinet however, contains her recipe books. This is where you can find a red folder with fading blue ink that says, "Wednesday's Sewing Club." The folder contains typed recipes that the members of the Sewing Club would bring in to share with one another. There are also random clippings from magazines and newspapers, recipes of the month from when my grandfather worked at the Ford Motor Company, emailed recipes from family members, and additional hand written ones as well.



Wednesday's Sewing Club Cookbook



Close up of the words on front

A cookbook is like a personal diary of sorts, it can tell a story about special events that have taken place, likes and dislikes of the owner, and the people in their life. As put by Elizabeth Fleitz “dog-eared pages, marginal notes, newspaper and magazine clippings pasted to the inside covers, and food-stained pages can all give clues to the former owner of the book and what her life was like” (Fleitz 2010, 1). Comparable to the cookbooks that have come before it, my Grandmother’s “Wednesday’s Sewing Club” cookbook holds the story of her life.

The “Wednesday Sewing Club” began in the 70s. It was a group of five women who decided to get together once a week to make quilts, work on crafts, and exchange ideas while their husbands were at work and the children were at school. In 1978 they started collecting the different recipes that the members would take turn bringing in each week. “It was a friendship thing. It was so we could always remember the fun times we

had together, and we would never forget one another. Every time we made one of the recipes we would think about the person we made it or the meetings.” (Brewer, 2014)

Recipes and cookbooks can tell the life story of its owner. Going through the “Wednesday’s Sewing Club” cookbook I could learn a lot from my grandmother even if I had never met her before it. I would be able to see whom the four other members of the group were from the names that went along with the submissions, along with the date of when the cookbook was created. From the random clippings stuffed inside the book I could tell what recipes were her favorites by the “good” or “delicious” comments that she had written out to the side. I could tell that she enjoyed novelty cooking, as there are many clippings things such as “How to Make a Christmas Tree Out of Cookies” or directions on how to make a baby carriage from a watermelon. There are clippings from a “Union Proud Recipe of the Month” from Ford Motor Company at the Kentucky plant, which means someone close to her most likely worked there. Emails about baby shower cakes from 2008 entitled “Cake for Gma” meaning she was probably a great-grandma by 2008. There are so many things that you can tell about someone from what they have saved in their cookbook.

Union Proud  Recipe of the Month

OVERNIGHT COLESLAW

12 c. shredded cabbage (medium head)	2 carrots, shredded
1 green pepper, chopped	1 medium red onion, chopped
	1 c. sugar

DRESSING:

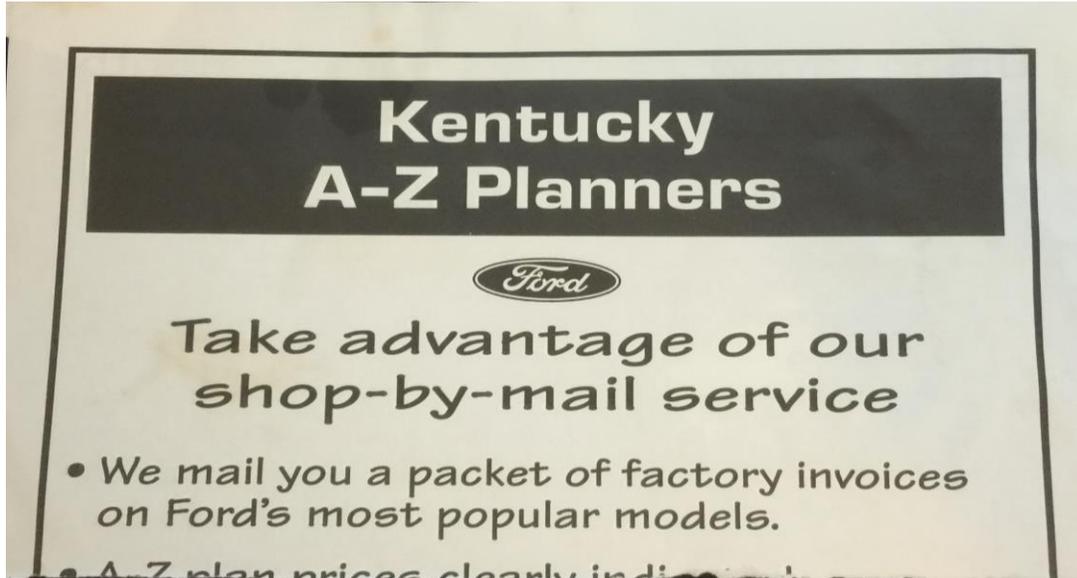
2 tsp. sugar	1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. dry mustard	1 c. vinegar
1 tsp. celery seed	$\frac{3}{4}$ c. vegetable oil

In large bowl, combine dressing ingredients. Sprinkle with sugar and set aside.

In a saucepan, combine dressing ingredients. Bring to a boil. Remove from heat and pour over vegetables, stirring to cover evenly. Cover and refrigerate overnight. Stir well before serving. Makes 12 to 16 servings.

Lillian and Don Crabtree

Monthly Ford Motor Company Recipe



Front of the monthly newsletter

The front page of the book is a drawing of a “homemaker” as my grandmother called her. She said that she had seen the image somewhere and thought it was “fitting” for their group. She drew the picture on the first page of each woman’s cookbook. The “homemaker” image represented the clubs view of how they seen themselves. The women of this time grew up during the “Leave it to Beaver” era where June Cleaver was the idealistic role model. It was the age when woman should have meals ready for their husbands when they get home, the house should always be kept spotless, and they better look nice and have a smile while doing it.

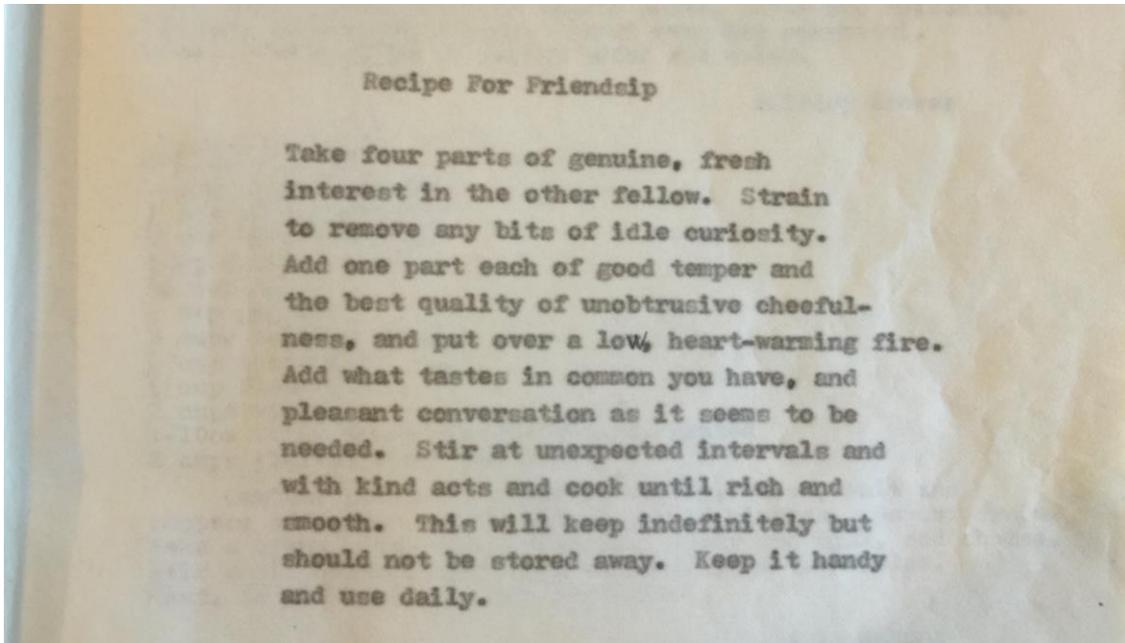


“Homemaker” drawing

The second page, on the other hand, holds a recipe for friendship. This page reflects the relationship that the members had for one another. “It stood for how we believed we should treat one another. It was sort of a set of rules or guideline for us to follow. One of the other girls had brought the Friendship recipe in and we all agreed that it would be the first recipe because it would be the best one” (Brewer, 2014).

Recipe For Friendship

Take four parts of genuine. Fresh interest in the other fellow, strain to remove any bits of idle curiosity. As one part each of good temper and the best quality of unobtrusive cheerfulness and put over a low, heart-warming fire. Add what tastes in common you have, and pleasant conversation as it seems to be needed. Stir at unexpected intervals and with kind acts and cook until rich and smooth. This will keep indefinitely but should not be stored away. Keep it handy and use daily.



Recipe for Friendship

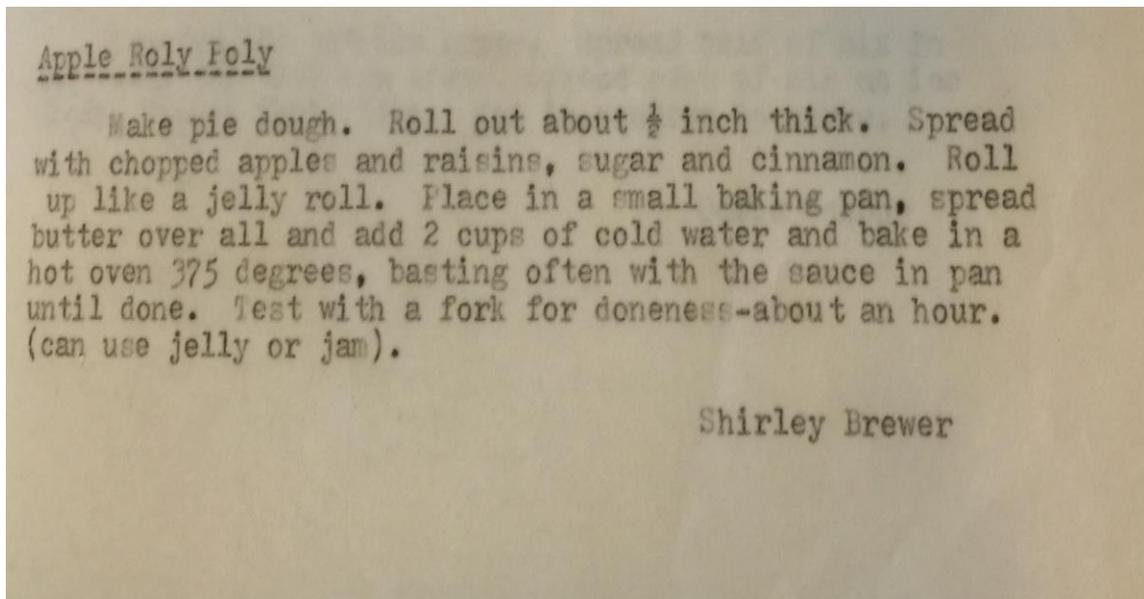
During an interview with my Grandmother we discussed the different recipes in the cookbook. You could hear the excitement in her voice with the flood of memories coming back to her. Such as “the girls and I always took turns driving to the store to get supplies for that meeting. I hadn’t had my license very long, and it was my turn to drive. I had to cross a bridge, and I was terrified of driving over bridges. I got up to it and closed my eyes! I was screaming and Doris started screaming, ‘You can’t do that sit back!’ This was because I was all the way leaned against the steering wheel. I inched my way across the bridge, and we made it, but they always talked about that day” (Brewer, 2014). “Oh there was this one time we had a new girl. Her recipes never made it into the book because she came to the group after the cookbook had been put out. She came from Pennsylvania and she brought a toffee recipe. We spent the entire day making it. It was so much fun, my kitchen was an absolute mess, but it was worth it. We made cute gift bags for the toffee to give out, but I think we ended up eating half of it” (Brewer, 2014).

As we chatted about recipes we ended up talking about the house she used to live in and cooking in the old kitchen. Flash backs popped in my head of those days. With a large glass bowl in my lap and a wooden spoon in hand, I sat on the brown counter with tiny feet dangling over the edge, stirring away. “Make sure to mix all of the flour in, we don’t want any white clumps left.” Grams has always had a thing about smoothing out all of the white flour clumps when baking. Twenty years and two counters later, I still get the same speech when baking with her. Many of my best childhood memories were made sitting on counters, learning to cook with my grandmother. “The kitchen is more than simply a room of memories. It’s where life lessons are learned [...] the place where we bring the lessons learned from our grandmothers and our mothers to the next generation” (Eves, 290).

Food has a way of bringing back memories of your past. Whether it is the special dinner that your Mom made every year for your birthday, or the food poisoning you got from the first time you tried to cook by yourself; when food is involved, memories always have a way of creeping back up on you. This is because “the knowing involved in making a cake is contained not simply in my head but in my hands, my wrists, my eyes and nose as well” (Eves, 291). “If body memory anchors human existence, place memory locates it. As we invoke body memory, we often invoke place as well, or a remembrance of our being-in-the world (remembering our body in a particular location)” or with a particular person (Eves, 292).

Just like the women created the “Sewing Club Cookbook” so they would always remember one another. Many of the recipes themselves have previous histories attached to them, along with ones created after submitted the recipes to the cookbook. An example

of this would be the “Apple Roly Poly” recipe. The recipe had been submitted by my grandmother (Shirley Brewer), but she had originally gotten the recipe from another member of the group (Doris) before the group had been started. Doris had gotten it from her mother when she went to visit her in Michigan. Fast-forward forty or so years to the 2000s, my grandma came to visit me when I lived in Virginia and she brought me some recipes the “Apple Roly Poly” just happened to be one of them. This is how folk recipes are spread. They get handed down from one person to the next. This one recipe has traveled from Michigan to Ohio (where Doris lived), to Kentucky (where my grandmother lives), to me in Virginia, and back to Kentucky when I moved once again.



Apple Roly Poly Recipe

Cookbooks and sharing recipes are more than passing along something that tastes good, or a list of ingredients. They are time capsules of past experiences that will one day be passed on to the next generation for them to add their own memories to. So the next time you share or receive a recipe do not take it for granted. “Thus recipe sharing can

literally lead to the consumption of a particular memory text and the concomitant digestion of the ideologies imbricated in that memory” (Eves, 292).

References

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